

Humanity's Step from Imperial Civilization to Ecological Civilization

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Thank you. I am honored to have this opportunity to share thoughts with this distinguished gathering in this wondrous place of lucid waters and lush mountains. Such an inspiring place to discuss the human imperative—and opportunity—to step from the Imperial Civilization of our human past to the Ecological Civilization on which our common future depends. Humanity has desperate need of China's leadership in navigating this transition.

As I assume everyone here is aware, the human species is destroying Earth's capacity to support life. By the best scientific estimate, we are on a path to self-extinction and have no more than 11 years—if that—to complete a change of course.

In my brief time this morning, I will summarize both how we got into this situation and the opportunity it presents to achieve President Xi Jinping's vision of a human future of lucid waters and lush mountains more valuable than gold and silver.

Our common human crisis is a consequence of institutions born of 5,000 years of Imperial Civilization—a time during which a few have lived in splendor through the ruthless exploitation of the many and Earth. It is a system that Earth can no longer sustain.

The search for solutions takes us to the deepest levels of understanding of life and of our distinctive nature as humans. The search also opens the possibility of creating the world of which humans have long dreamed.

Let's start with life. All forms of life exist in a constant struggle against what scientists call entropy, the physical forces of disorder. To this end, living organisms continuously labor as intelligent, self-organizing, self-regenerating communities.

Our human relationship to Earth provides an example. Through their complex interactions, Earth's many species labor together to create and

continuously regenerate the clean water that hydrates our bodies, the air that oxygenates our bodies, the fertile soils that grow the food that nourishes our bodies, and the climate stability essential to all these processes.

The human body provides another example. Our conscious mind resides in a living body created and maintained through the labor of trillions of individual, intelligent, self-organizing, decision-making cells. If those cells fail in their common cause, they die, and we, their host, die. Similarly, if the organic processes at the planetary scale fail, Earth dies.

What is the beneficial role humans can potentially play on this extraordinary planet? Among Earth's many species, we are unique in our ability to imagine and create futures of our choosing. That capacity can be a great gift, but only so long as the world we imagine is consistent with the well-being of people and the Earth that sustains us all.

If we forget or ignore life's essential requirements, the consequences will be devastating—as our current situation demonstrates. We are in crisis because we temporarily forgot that we are living beings born of and nurtured by a living Earth. Forgetting that reality, we embraced a devastatingly flawed economic theory known as neoliberalism.

We made money our god, became a species of money worshipers, and dedicated ourselves to growing the numbers we call money in disregard of the consequences for our own existence. The resulting economy wantonly destroys life to make money for billionaires. We are just beginning to wake up to the ultimate consequence of this folly.

The earliest humans lived as hunter gatherers. They moved with the seasons to harvest their food and live from whatever Earth provided. This gave them an intuitive understanding of nature and a deep appreciation for what it provides.

Then, some 10,000 years ago, humans transitioned to settled agriculture. No longer itinerant, we cultivated the soils of the place where we settled, living in relative peace with one another and the land.

Five thousand years later, we transitioned to the Imperial Civilization that prevails to this day. Power and wealth became concentrated in ever fewer hands as kings and emperors used military force to control vast populations and the lands on which they depended. The few lived in opulence. The many were pressed into lives of deprivation and servitude.

Centuries later, emerging democratic forces began to restrain the power of the rulers. In their effort to circumvent these democratic constraints, rulers invented the corporate charter, which provided a powerful instrument for monopolizing private control of natural and financial wealth.

The United States, which claims to be the leading architect and champion of modern democracy, is also the architect and champion of global corporate rule—modern day capitalism.

The appeal of capitalism rests on the *illusion* that money is wealth and *the false claim* that those who make money create new wealth to the ultimate benefit of everyone.

We forget that money is only a number. It has value only because we are taught to accept it in exchange for those things on which our lives depend—like food and water.

Money can be a useful tool for facilitating exchange among strangers. It can also become a dehumanizing addiction causing whole societies to forget the essential interdependence of people and nature. We begin to believe that if society just had enough money, we could effortlessly fulfill every wish with no need to work or to care for others and nature.

Focused on the money illusion, we made GDP growth the goal of economic life. For several decades we failed to notice the actual result. Toxic soil. Polluted rivers. Depleted aquifers. Unbreathable air. Unbearable temperatures. Erratic rainfall. Endemic floods, droughts, and fires.

In our worship of money, we are destroying nature—the lucid waters and lush mountains—to grow the fortunes of billionaires. The illusion is now dissolving and the institutions that served it are losing credibility.

I am reminded of the mythical story of King Midas of Ancient Greece. He won the favor of the God of Wine, who granted him one wish. His wish? ... “May all that I touch turn to gold!”

King Midas was elated—until he touched his food, his water—and his beloved daughter. We are like King Midas, experiencing the folly of a foolish wish. ***Turning life into money is a deadly bargain.***

Our guiding premise going forward must be that the faster GDP and the fortunes of billionaires grow, the faster Earth will die, and the sooner humans will become extinct.

This premise has special implications for my country and yours: the United States and China.

By conventional wisdom, our dynamic economies are models for the world to emulate. By our emerging new understanding, however, we are the models to avoid.

The United States is the leading source of humanity’s burden on the planet. It would take 5 Earth planets for all the world’s people to live as we do. In China you face the grim reality that it would take 3.6 Earth planets for all the world to live as you now do. With your current rate of economic growth, the number of Earth planets required is almost certain to grow, despite your commitment to clean energy. In the process both our countries are creating record numbers of billionaires.

And we have only one Earth to sustain the lives of all.

More alarming still, when we look more closely at the economies of the United States and China, we see that while a few people live extremely well and each has a major consumer class, the substantial majority of people in both the United States and China are overworked, underpaid, and endure a daily struggle to survive. Far from being economies for other countries to

emulate, both our countries present examples of what the world must now avoid.

We must confront this reality with honesty and courage—and join in seeking an alternative path.

Let us be clear. The goal of a successful economy must be to meet the essential material needs of every person. This must be done in ways that restore the health of Earth's regenerative systems while bringing people good health, happiness, and a sense of pride in their contribution to the well-being of the whole.

That well-being cannot be achieved if the economy is controlled by profit maximizing transnational corporations. It can be achieved only if we organize as living communities of people who work together with nature for the well-being of all. Government and business—indeed all institutions—must be accountable to the people of the communities they exist to serve.

We have few examples of how best to achieve this goal. If we are clear on the goal, however, we can learn—and hopefully very rapidly. In my presentation to the economics track this afternoon, I will spell out what success will require.

China, perhaps more than any other nation, has demonstrated an ability to act quickly and decisively. And Wulong, as a World Heritage site and tourist destination has the potential to become a world educational site for people to experience the beauty of a simple life lived in mutually supportive relationship with one another and nature in a healthy natural setting of strikingly beautiful lucid waters and lush mountains.

China, however, has yet to make a choice between two possible futures. It can continue to be a world leader in GDP growth and the creation of new billionaires—as Earth dies and humans go extinct.

Or it can choose to lead humanity to a future that works for all people and the whole of life for generations to come.

15 minutes = 1,590 words.

There are no winners on a dead Earth. We will achieve well-being together or we will expire together. China's choice will likely be humanity's choice.
Thank you.